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DENBY, FROM "LEATHERNECK" TO SECRETARY OF THE NAVY



(a) Keystone View Co.
Past and present. Josephus Daniels, wartime secretary of the navy, and his successor, Mr. Denby, who saw service with the marines

William Atherton Du Puy

EDWIN DENBY, now secretary of the navy, was one of the biggest "boots" that ever came to Paris Island—palmetto-fringed, sand-rimmed, sun-blistered, training station during the great war.

He was, in fact, six feet one and a half and weighed 250 pounds. Likewise he was forty-eight years of age and entirely without herbage on his crown. Thus he stood out among the 30,000 other men who were here converted from raw recruits, from "boots," into the straightest-shooting body of soldiers the world has ever known, a member of the marine corps and nicknamed from the collars on their old-time uniforms "Leathernecks."

Asking and receiving no favors not granted to other men at the island, most of whom were not half his age and many of whom were not half his weight, this volunteer recruit took all the grilling soldier training that was offered—hikes, bayonet drill, target practice, squad duty.

He acquitted himself so well that he became a drill sergeant and took other companies "around the loop," administering to them all that had been handed him.

Then he became master of the "marine chat," that heart-to-heart talk that is given the men before they take the oath of the service; that third degree which is intended to break the faint-hearted and drive out the unworthy. Here, he told me, he rendered the service that was the glory of his life and the most emotional experience he ever expects to come to him.

To the individual who has the habit of declaiming against the untrained people who come to responsive posts, I would like to suggest an examination of the experience of Edwin Denby, over at the Navy Department.

NOT many people recognized the name of Denby when it was first announced for this post. He was later identified as a man who had been in Congress some years back, who had served as a sergeant of marines in the late war.

But when I went to the Navy Department to talk to him about the outstanding events of his life I found that its living was like a primary, collegiate and post-graduate course in public service. Here, basing judgment on what he has done, ought to be a man who knows how to go about the affairs of government.

Mr. Denby himself sketched through the years for me. The interview took place in the office of the secretary of the navy, the longest official reception room in Washington, looking out on the executive offices of the White House not a hundred feet away. The walls of this great room are covered with paintings of secretaries that have gone before. They overflow into the outer office and still there is no room. Some of them have found resting places in an attic above. Mr. Daniels one day commented sadly on the journey of the picture of a secretary from this room to the outer office and finally to the garret and murmured philosophically, "Such is fame."

EDWIN DENBY, to begin with, came of public service stock. His mother's father was Graham N. Fitch, one-time United States senator and the colonel of a regiment in the Civil War. His father was likewise a colonel in that great adventure. Both were of Revolutionary families and of British blood. The elder Denby was a Virginian by birth.

"My father became minister to China when I was fifteen," said Mr. Denby, "and I went along. That was in 1885. The world has forgotten the attitude of China in those days to the foreigner. We lived in Peking but as a people apart. To the upper class Chinaman, whose women folk never showed themselves, the conduct of our ladies was unthinkable. Their appearance on the street, particularly their practice of dancing, disgraced them so unforgivably, according to Oriental standards, that they were socially banned."

"Not long ago I attended a dinner in Detroit and a Chinese woman appeared and made a speech. This was the concrete demonstration of the change in the Chinese view in my time."

"At the age of seventeen I went to work for the Chinese Imperial Maritime Customs Service and remained there for ten years. This service was administered by a co-operation of many nations. My associates were from many parts of the world, spoke many languages. In my mess there might be five men from five different countries."

The new secretary's first love was the navy and he saw service on the U. S. S. Yosemite, becoming a gunner's mate, but he began his political climb from a lawyer's desk in Detroit, serving in Congress from 1905 to 1911

As a youngster I acquired the point of view of the Orient, of course, but I also learned that of diplomacy and of many men from many lands. After ten years of this I could not have been provincial nor could I have failed to view questions from something of a world vantage. It was a remarkable school."

THE big secretary chuckled. It was good to hear him. I had first seen him in a crowded banquet hall where he spoke. His voice was like the rumbling of thunder through mountain canyons. The chandeliers rattled with its reverberation.

Then I had seen him greeting the employees of his department early in his administration. He shook hands with 3000 of them in a single afternoon. Mrs. Denby was by his side, a slim little woman but physically fit, who had known Washington official life as a girl, for her father was Henry T. Thurber, secretary to Grover Cleveland. She was as untired after the day's work as her big husband. They are genial folks who scatter many smiles about. They have at home a little girl of five and a boy of eight.

Mr. Denby told me about his return to the United States after twelve years' absence, of a hurried course at the law and of the coming of the Spanish-American war.

He had been a member of the naval reserve in Detroit, had seen much of navies in the Orient. The navy was his first love. He enlisted as a seaman, saw plenty of active service aboard the U. S. S. Yosemite, where, after much stoking of engines and scrubbing of decks, he became a gunner's mate.

These round-hatted, flare-trousered men of the navy were not then called "gobs." That term developed in the recent war and, strangely, had its origin in that China which Mr. Denby knows so well. "Gob," in fact, is the Chinese word for sailor and crept into the language through the Far Eastern fleet.

It has not often happened that a secretary of the navy has slept in the hammock of an enlisted man, has polished the mechanism of the long-range guns in the turrets of a battleship, has maneuvered with a battle fleet when it played the game of war on the invisible checkerboard of the seas. It is obvious, however, how much more real the problems of the service will seem to such a man than to one whose nautical experience has been obtained in the cabin of a so-called seagoing hack.

Edwin Denby practiced law in Detroit, went to the state Legislature, served three terms in the Congress of the United States covering the period of 1905-1911. He says that this was all very excellent training for that ultimate service, the delivery of the "marine chat." He seems to put more store by his "gob" and "boot" activities than to those other seemingly more important experiences.

ON THE day Mr. Harding was inaugurated he walked from that ceremony into the Senate chamber, handed that body his list of cabinet officers and got them confirmed within half an hour. He was able to do this because of his intimate knowledge of the procedure of the body in which he had so recently served. What he did was an example of the effectiveness of an understanding between the executive and the legislative branches of government. Mr. Denby, it is held, and Mr. Weeks, his neighbor in the War Department, also with a long legislative experience, should be able to function the more efficiently because of those years on the hill.

"At Paris Island," said Mr. Denby, coming back to his favorite experience, "I must have talked to 20,000 men. These recruits came up in groups of a hundred before they had taken the oath. We could not know the past of all these men, and we wanted to be sure of the quality of each individual

before we took him in. It was my job to impress on these groups the importance of the thing they were doing, the quality that must be in a man before he could hope to live up to the standard of the marines, the sacrifice of bringing into that organization a dross nature, of putting into its uniform a body and spirit that might do other than credit to it. I therefore admonished every man who had anything in his heart that raised a question of his admissibility to come to me in my tent and make a clean breast.

"As I talked I would pick out a man here and there in whose consciousness was being fought a mighty battle. Sometimes one of these would jump to his feet and cry out that he had done an unworthy thing. Possibly he had served time for an offense against the law. He would come clean and we would weigh his offense and decide whether it was sufficient to bar him. Scores came regularly to my tent as to a confessional."

"HAVE you copies of any of these talks to recruits," I asked Mr. Denby. He found some extracts for me that were in print and I quote a few paragraphs because I think they reveal the man and because they are good gospel to anybody.

"To me the sight of the flag," one of these speeches runs, "takes the hurt and the pain out of most things. To me the flag seems like some beautiful spirit, always lovingly brooding over our ships at sea and our camps at home and the battlefield of our men at war—the spirit of a nation looking down in sympathy on its sons."

"There is no man among us but has left at home some woman. Let me say to you that ours is the easy part, no matter what suffering and hardship we have to undergo. While you are learning the art of the soldier your bodies are being built up and things of interest are constantly coming to your attention. In battle, after the guns begin to roll and the first tremor of nervousness is over, you will find the lust of battle to possess you. And if the white road to duty shall lead to the soldier's grave, it is not, after all, so terrible. Men must die some time, and you will never again have the chance to offer your lives in so noble a cause."

"The women at home do not have this exaltation. Their lot is that of work and prayer. They pray for three things: That the war shall be soon over, and we most earnestly join them in that; that their men, wherever they be, will come home alive out of the struggle, and we can join again in that, but we cannot promise, for our fate is on the knees of the gods; and that, if we do come home, we shall come as clean and decent and upright gentlemen as we left."

"Nowhere in the world does a man stand more squarely on his own feet, to make or mar his character, than in the military service. So remember, if you want to go back worthy to look your women in the face;

if you want to go back and have them glad you came and not sorry that a kindly bullet did not leave you on the field of honor over there—it is up to you, men, it is up to you."

It is easy to visualize this big marine, now a lieutenant, with his amplifier voice, among the palmettos on a lonely island off the coast of South Carolina, thus communing with the young Sir Galahads just setting out on their quests. It is easy to appreciate the feeling that he has toward those men now when, as secretary of the navy, he has come to command them all. It is easy to conceive, also, the feeling toward the department that remains in the breasts of the men in the service, many of whom entered it while Lieutenant Denby was delivering the "chat."

WHILE he talked I recalled the jam in front of the Capitol on inauguration day. As the crowds broke up the congestion was great at certain funnel points. Two young marines were just ahead of me, and I heard one of them softly admonish the other.

"Don't push," he said. "Remember your uniform." It was the spirit of the service. Mr. Denby was retired as a reserve major of marines. General Lejeune, commandant of that corps, says that, after Mr. Denby was sworn in as secretary he, the general, got out the regulations and examined them carefully in the hope that he might have the authority to make the secretary, as a reserve major, jump through the hoop. He found, on the contrary, that here was a case where the major general had to take

orders from a mere reserve major in his own service.

Another incident of the early experience of this "gob" and "boot" secretary of the navy, which lifts the curtain of drab routine and reveals the heartbeat that may be back of it, occurred on the occasion of the arrival of Colonel Theodore Roosevelt, the assistant secretary. When one considers the proved patriotic zeal of the two men, it is not surprising that the assistant secretary should have asked:

"In case a war breaks out, which one of us goes?"

And it lent the spice of contest to the situation when the secretary replied:

"The one who gets to the President first."

Such is the man at the head of the Navy Department in this, the hour of its great uncertainty. There is the possibility that it may grow into the greatest fighting fleet that has ridden the waves since time began and that he may be the instrument of its upbuilding. There is also the possibility that the nations may agree on a program of approximate disarmament and that to him will fall the task of whittling down Neptune's armored armada to meet the requirements of a great new day of international understanding and agreement.

Too Smart

A CERTAIN judge in a southern city had before him a case wherein one of the attorneys gave expression to certain extraordinary legal opinions.

Now as this had to do with accounts, his honor asked the lawyer:

"I understand that you are also something of an accountant."

"Yes, your honor; I know a little of accounts."

"And you also claim expert knowledge of the real estate dealings involved in this case?"

"Yes, your honor; I know a little about real estate."

"Well," said the justice, after a pause, "If you only knew a little about the law, you'd know a little about everything, wouldn't you?"

Unfortunate Man

GEORGIE surveyed with puzzled eyes a sentence in his reading lesson. At last he raised his hand.

"Well, Georgie, what is it?" asked the teacher.

"What is a feebly, Miss Smith?"

"A feebly," repeated Miss Smith, in astonished tones. "What do you mean, Georgie? Feebly is an adverb, not a noun."

Georgie was unconvinced. "It's something that grows," he said. "It says so here."

"Bring me your book," said the mystified teacher.

Whereupon Georgie complied and laboriously read out the sentence:

"The man—had a feebly—growing down—his chin."



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Edwin S. Denby, now secretary of the navy, who gained first-hand impressions of this arm of our fighting service as a private in the marine corps